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ABSTRACT

Since 1965, student views and feelings have influenced great changes in higher education, sometimes to the detriment of long-term interests in academic institutions and colleges. One conspicuous recent trend is the desire of college students for more influence, impact, or power. Other prevalent attitudes may be characterized as a desire to be anti-traditional, positive to change in general (especially rapid and extreme change), and free from controls such as living regulations, dress codes, and prohibitions concerning demonstrations. Based on an 80-item instructional preference scale administered to 700 freshmen at Michigan State University in 1975, students consistently rejected activities that suggested prescription, uniformity, compulsion, requirements, impersonalization, instructor control, systematic coverage, and relative grading. Television as an instructional medium was also indicated as undesirable, and programmed instruction and pass-no credit grading systems were rejected. Using these data, it is suggested that student preferences by themselves can be fallible and misleading as an exclusive basis for isolating effective learning tasks. Student views must be considered in making institutional decisions, but students appear to have a problem in specifying aspects of their instructional experiences which lead to effective learning because their immediate short-term desires for identity, acceptance, and freedom are too real and overpowering. (DC)

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Student Influence and Higher Education

Arvo E. Juola

Paper #38

MSU IS AN AFFIRMATIVE
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STUDENT INFLUENCE AND HIGHER EDUCATION

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The past decade (since about 1965) can truly be regarded as a period of change in higher education. Colleges which have generally been regarded as conservative and non-responsive to pressures of any kind have suddenly become receptive to change and innovation. While some of the adaptations can be attributed to technological advances, judicial decisions, and responses to societal problems, a major factor in the receptivity of colleges toward change must be attributed to a growing concern for student views in institutional and instructional planning.

Looking back, we can see how this unprecedented concern for student views evolved from intuitive judgments made to "quiet down" a restive student body during the highly emotional climate of the widespread anti-war demonstrations of the late sixties. The seed and direction for reactions, however, probably goes back to the mid-sixties when small but enthusiastic student activist groups set the stage with their call for more relevance, equality, less elitism, etc., and then successfully managed to tie their missions with the anti-war demonstrations. The reforms proposed by the activists were not original. One can see the influence of early progressives such as Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Dewey, and Thoreau in the reforms proposed. And, as with most movements, many of the initial effects seem desirable. It did jar colleges and universities into reexamining what they were doing and how effectively they were doing it.

But, as with most movements with an emotional overtone, we often over-react. Few earlier cared or dared speak against a movement which was so pervasive. We now, however, are in a position to also speculate about possible positive and negative consequences. We also can look back on ten years of experience with the changes and innovations which appear attributable to our concern with student views. We hear reports of classes becoming more humane and enjoyable but at the same time less structured, prescriptive, or demanding. It probably is more than a coincidence that the same ten-year period of dramatic change in higher education coincides with the ten-year trend of grade inflation in both higher education and public schools, as well as ten years of reported decreases in test scores for national, state and university testing programs.

The thrust of this paper is to speculate about the impact that the concern for student views and feelings is having on higher education. The focus will be on trying to understand the direction of the student perspective. Efforts will then be made to point to areas where the concern for student views may be resulting in programs which are contrary to the better long-term interests of higher education.

One conspicuous recent trend is the desire of college students for more influence, impact, or power. No one issue marshals student representatives together as effectively as a threat to their existing sphere of influence or the opportunity to increase their relative impact. An incident in our University College Council three years ago

is illustrative. Four months into the academic year students had been able to find but four students to fill six allotted college council positions and even the attendance of these four had been irregular. But, when the issue of additional representatives to the council for academic advising specialists was being considered, all student representatives arrived presenting a proposal to have student representation increase proportionately from six to seven if the size of the council increases (requiring now three vacant billets to be filled).

At one time I would have attributed this drive for influence to only small members of enthusiastic student leaders. This is no longer true. I administered a questionnaire to Michigan State University seniors in 1975 and also some of the same questions to new freshmen in 1971 and 1975. Responses to the issue of whether students should serve on the university governing board (the board of trustees) showed two-thirds of the students in agreement. Students were also asked whether they should have a major, minor, or equal voice with faculty and the administration on selected higher educational issues. It was no surprise that a large majority of both groups indicated a desire for equal or greater representation regarding housing rules and non-academic disciplinary matters. What was surprising was that a majority of students also indicated a desire for equal or greater representation on issues such as grading practices, courses to be offered (curricular decisions), course content, and academic probation of students, and plagiarism. These data seem to indicate that students' desires for more influence and impact are far from being satisfied. The student demonstrations of the late 1960's appear to have convinced the majority that students can achieve a specific identity and results with which to identify if they speak with a common voice.

Students tend also to be anti-traditional and highly positive to change in general. Given a choice between regular or traditional programs and viable alternatives, they will choose the alternatives, especially if they feel they had input into molding the new. Students, quite logically, cannot be expected to identify with existing programs where they feel little personal or group investment, but they can derive satisfaction in new programs where they or their counterparts have had direct or indirect input. This view is a marked departure from previous institutions' perspectives where a tested historical perspective was generally preferred over non-validated alternative approaches. Experimental programs have always been permitted on limited trial bases but adopted more generally only after demonstrable advantages were indicated.

Students tend to favor not only change and innovative but rapid and extreme change. They are impatient with how slowly innovations are implemented through regular administrative channels. A new idea which appears reasonable now, they feel, should be adopted without time-consuming reexamination. They often tend to favor a complete substitution of the new for the old rather than the process of moderation with corrective adjustments which capitalize on the best of both the old and the new.

There is little doubt that a major directional drive for students, what they really want, is the desire to be free from control--to be free from rules, compulsion or regulations, and to control their own lives. And, it is obvious that they have been amazingly successful. We see this in the autonomy they have secured in off-campus and on-campus living regulation, voice with vote, freedom to demonstrate, dress regulations, and the like.

But what bothers me most are the recent signs of these same basic student desires for autonomy being extended to include the academic side of student life. We see signs of student preferences for reducing the number of required courses, for giving students unlimited options to plan their own programs, etc., but at the cost of negating planned educational programs which must rely upon rules and regulations for general applicability. It was indicative, in response to a survey question seeking student views on general education course requirements, that over three-fourths of the 1,000 seniors surveyed in 1975 now indicated a preference for satisfying the requirements by choosing more courses in their specialized area or by bypassing the general education requirement altogether. Even judiciously planned educational programs to round out the students' education do not, in this momentary trend toward career education, meet student approval when they involve requirements and restrictions. Similarly, when asked if the number of required courses should be decreased and more electives allowed, 48 percent of our seniors said yes, required courses should be decreased while only 7 percent said we've already gone too far. While nearly one-half indicated support for existing requirements, the direction for change is clear if student views are to provide the guide.

What about student views toward the most emotional of educational requirements, namely, toward evaluation or course grades? A possible product of the student-centered orientation is very likely being revealed in national trend toward higher grades. This phenomenon has been given the contemporary term, "Grade Inflation." Are students concerned by inflated grades and possible reduction in academic standards? Indeed yes, but primarily by students who already have superior cumulative academic records and see signs of their past efforts and achievements deteriorating in value. But what of future evaluations or grades in areas where they are uncertain about their success? The answer now must be a firm NO! No one likes to be evaluated when there is uncertainty about the outcome. That is, if an option is to be accepted now without further evaluation or judgment. University officials regularly speak of the need for continual evaluation--of programs, colleges, departments and the like, but seldom evaluation of themselves or their own programs. A college president is naturally concerned and less than enthusiastic about evaluation when he learns that a regional accrediting board is scheduled to appear on his campus. An administrator who voluntarily recommends that an impartial evaluating body be established to critically examine his own actions and procedures is indeed a rarity except under conditions of duress. The faculty, too, profess support for the need for continual evaluation of departments, programs, procedures, administration, students, and the like, as long as they are of other units, groups, and individuals. But when thoughts of instructional evaluation or merit raises are mentioned, many professors can think of reasons to delay or to avoid the process. Students, too, feel evaluation is desirable! When our MSU seniors were asked whether there should be more, the same as now, or less student evaluation of faculty, the results were overwhelming--79 percent of the seniors indicated that that there should be more student evaluation of faculty while only 2 percent indicated a desire for less.

It appears to be a general human desire to be accepted as adequate without further question and inquiry. Everyone wishes to avoid the anxiety and uncertainty of being under surveillance. Students are no exception. An increasing number wish grades and examinations could be eliminated, de-emphasized, or neutralized. But, desires of this kind have little bearing on the utility of grades and evaluation as a stimulant and guide in the learning process or upon their value as safeguards of academic standards which contribute to the credibility of the college degree.

The question posed to seniors above regarding student evaluation of faculty was but one of 15 innovative practices which seniors were asked to evaluate. As expected, on the basis of the earlier discussion on the positive student disposition toward innovation and change, seniors indicated a highly positive endorsement for 12 of the 15 innovative practices (a large majority felt there should be more of the indicated innovations). Instructional practices which seniors wished to be increased included activities such as discussion of contemporary issues, field work outside of the classroom, provision in class to pursue individual interests, independent study for credit, many classes considering issues such as pollution, ecology, consumerism and student involvement in how classes are to conducted. But, alternative activities such as these are often primarily designed to stimulate student interest and to provide a desired change of routine from the basic more substantive considerations in many courses. To include more stimulating activities such as these could detract from basic course goals. Clearly, they provide students more freedom and options and free them from classroom control and prescription. Student outcomes from these activities are also awkward to monitor, evaluate, or grade. And, higher grades are often given when there is a non-uniform or highly subjective basis for justifying lower grades. Perhaps this is an additional reason for students with the experience preferring innovative classes with less structured content or a record of permissive grading.

The three innovative activities which were not supported by seniors suggest other factors influencing what they want. Television as an instructional medium was indicated as undesirable, and they were conspicuously less enthusiastic about programmed instruction or pass-no credit grades. Together, the data suggest that students favor innovations and change but not if the changes appear impersonal, prescriptive, structured, or essentially task rather than student-centered. On this basis I constructed an 80-item instructional preference scale to survey the disposition of students toward factors such as these in addition to dimensions such as freedom versus regulation, flexibility vs. uniformity, acceptance vs. standards, covert mental vs. overt physical activity, etc. This was administered to 700 freshmen this past fall. Activities which three-quarters or more of the freshmen indicated as desirable in contrast to undesirable or neutral are the following:

Classes with (which):

Much discussion and interaction
Much freedom to pursue individual interests
Lectures spiced with really good humor and jokes
Flexibility in class activities reflecting the mood of the class
Time allowed for student questions and viewpoints
Is fun to attend

Where the Instructor:

Shows as much interest in students as in the material being taught
Shows uniform fairness to everyone
Shows a personal interest in students
Encourages and answers all kinds of questions in class
Demonstrates much familiarity with current ideas and issues
Permits extra work to improve a grade

Where the Student:

Feels secure and unthreatened
Is treated with respect
Is treated like an informed adult

This list of activities appears to focus on objectives which are peripheral to considerations leading to substantive learning but are critical to the students' immediate sense of well-being. Satisfying all of these objectives would not necessarily contribute to effective learning or proficiency in an area. While perceptive instructors would and, I think, should try to consider the human-element factors such as these, I know many outstanding instructors in certain disciplines who pay little attention to most of them.

It is also informative to consider the activities students tend to reject. These were items which more students cited as undesirable rather than desirable class activities. These comprise (i.e., students don't like):

Classes with (which):

Many regular systematic lectures
Regular weekly quizzes
Regular written assignments on basic course material
Frequent deadlines to be met
Lessons presented and guided by computer terminals
Basic theory stressed over practical use
Programmed lessons studied in carrels
Only portions of original works with interpretations presented
Is highly structured

Where the Instructor:

Keeps regular attendance records
Spends time answering only the relevant questions in class

Where the Grades are Based on:

Voluntary projects
How you compared with all others in the class
Only "pass or fail"
A curve; e.g., 15-25% get A's, 0-5% get an F

These activities checked as undesirable, appear to show a rejection for prescription, uniformity, compulsion, requirements, impersonalization, instructor control, systematic coverage, and relative grading. I acknowledge that these activities tend to minimize the human element in instruction, but very few of these activities can be criticized for not being a potentially efficient stimulant in effective learning with group instruction.

The results of this survey suggest that student preferences by themselves can be fallible and misleading as an exclusive basis for isolating effective learning tasks. Factors which appear to cloud the student perspective include short-term personal desires as opposed to long-term consideration of experiences leading to fulfillment of goals for which higher educational institutions were established. Students undoubtedly do wish their composite acquisition of fundamental knowledge and skills to be maximal. They certainly desire the college degree they seek to be as credible, salable, and distinctive as possible. But students appear to have a problem in specifying aspects of their instructional experiences which lead to effective learning because their immediate short-term desires for identity, acceptance,

and freedom are more real and overpowering. They face a conflict of interests in making judgments because they want to be contented now as well as distinctly proficient later. The problem perhaps evolves from students being consumers. They may be too involved and immersed in the dynamics of the instructional process to be truly reflective. They have problems providing the detached and impartial long-range perspective necessary in determining essential experiences leading to productive learning. They are more conscious of short-term desires evoked by personal concerns they are now feeling as students. If our instructional goals in the classroom were to secure maximal student enthusiasm and acceptance, our mission would be clear. But, as educators, we must also ask whether this perspective is sufficient.

The purpose here has been to raise questions about what may be an excessive student influence in directing instructional practices and procedures in higher education. The reality of the influence seems clear and real. While organized student groups trying to influence instructional practices are now atypical, more subtle influences such as the use of student reactions to evaluate instructors and courses have become widely accepted, with some of the reactions even published for general student use. These reactions are often used as the primary mode of feedback regarding instructional effectiveness. They are so easy to secure, quantify, and interpret. But, if the hypotheses proposed in this paper have substance, such as certain student motives being predictable and misleading, and if many of the recent directions toward which higher education has been moving can be attributed to concern for student views, we may be using a biased perspective for developing and justifying many of the recent innovations in instructional programs. The data suggest that we must also question a growing tendency to equate the popularity of a class with course effectiveness. Student enjoyment and enthusiasm may connote a higher level of interest in class but it does not necessarily imply a higher degree of motivation or a disposition toward dedicated effort and more intensive study in the course. Rather, it is quite possible that enthusiasm partially achieved by reducing prescription and requirements may have a contrary effect. If so, what is being sacrificed? There is no more basic a learning principle than that substantive learning is a direct function of the amount of concentrated individual student effort. Classroom excitement and enthusiasm is admirable and exhilarating to both the student and instructor, but, it is not a substitute for systematic study. Perhaps, institutional analyses of the relative amount of time students have devoted to out-of-class study over the past ten years as well as differences in study time in classes with alternative instructional styles could be revealing. The viewpoint presented in this discussion is largely theoretical at this stage--only limited data is provided to support the hypotheses proposed. But, the data appear consistent and the implications of this perspective for higher education is substantial.

But, in conclusion, I am not speaking against ignoring student views. We must continue to listen to students and to seek their views. Student views are critical because they represent input from recipients who are continually exposed to our instructional efforts. They help assess whether our planned efforts are achieving the impact we seek. As educational professionals, we also must be careful to not be closed to new ideas which may be more productive than traditional ones. But I hope we can learn to be guided by those student views which are consistent with basic institutional and societal goals in contrast to those which represent short-term desires for avoiding immediate frustration and serving only personal needs. We must not have our faculty give up basic time-honored and verified principles which guide their instruction for what may be irrelevant and distorted considerations. Our efforts in higher education should always be directed toward what students need and not simply toward what we think they want.

Different portions of this paper were presented previously at colloquia at the annual meetings of The Society for College and University Planning, The Midwest Academic Affairs Administrator's Association, and The American College Personnel Association. Symposium topics were "What Do Students Really Want?", "Student Power and Higher Education," and "Academic Standards in a New Era."